

New Jersey Department of Education Office of Early Childhood Education

End of the Year Report: 2004- 2005

The mission of the New Jersey Department of Education is to provide leadership for a superior education by utilizing multiple and diverse paths to success for all children in New Jersey. The Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE) is responsible for the youngest children served by our public schools. This year, we have made significant progress in improving the quality of preschool programs, a prerequisite to preparing children to enter school with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality* and the kindergarten Core Curriculum Content Standards.

The OECE is charged with policy development and leadership of, and support for, district-sponsored preschool programs. Working with the Office of Special Education and with the offices of the regional assistant commissioners and county superintendents, OECE staff provides guidance and program oversight to districts that receive state funding in three categories:

- 31 Abbott districts
- 101 non-Abbott districts that receive Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) and
- 27 districts that participate in the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI).

The primary responsibility of the OECE is to implement the Abbott preschool program. In addition, support and professional development are provided for the ECPA districts that have concentrations of poverty and whose children need a strong preschool foundation to be equally prepared for kindergarten. To expand the reach of high-quality preschool programs, the legislature approved funding for the Early Launch to Learning Initiative to serve four-year-olds in non-Abbott districts in high-quality, inclusive classrooms.

The Abbott Preschool Programs

Great strides have been made this year in strengthening Abbott Preschool programs. Our efforts address accountability and fiscal responsibility, capacity-building, and—most importantly--improving program quality. Research reports show measurable results of these efforts – both in program quality and in outcomes for children.

Accountability and fiscal responsibility:

In the 2004-2005 school year, the budget for the Abbott preschool program reached more than \$444 million with an average of \$10,800 per pupil. In order to review budgets for 700 preschool sites in the 31 Abbott districts each year, OECE staff continues to streamline the budget and planning process.

The Department gives high priority to ensure that preschool funds are used efficiently and appropriately. The Department, via the Office of Compliance Investigation and the Office of Internal Audit for state operated districts, conducted limited review examinations for fiscal year 2004-2005 of 108 providers. The providers ranged in size from 1 to 16 classrooms and included three Head Start agencies.

From the preliminary findings, we conclude that providers continue to have difficulty segregating Abbott expenditures, accurately and completely filling out Quarterly Expenditure Reports and record keeping in general. However, progress is being made. To further this effort, a training module on budget and accounting will be developed for district fiscal specialists to use with their providers.

The findings in the limited review examinations help districts to work with providers to develop a corrective action plan and then monitor its progress. In some cases, contracts were not renewed for providers with egregious violations, some of which were referred to appropriate authorities for follow-up. Money was recovered from providers where actual expenses were less than with approved budgets.

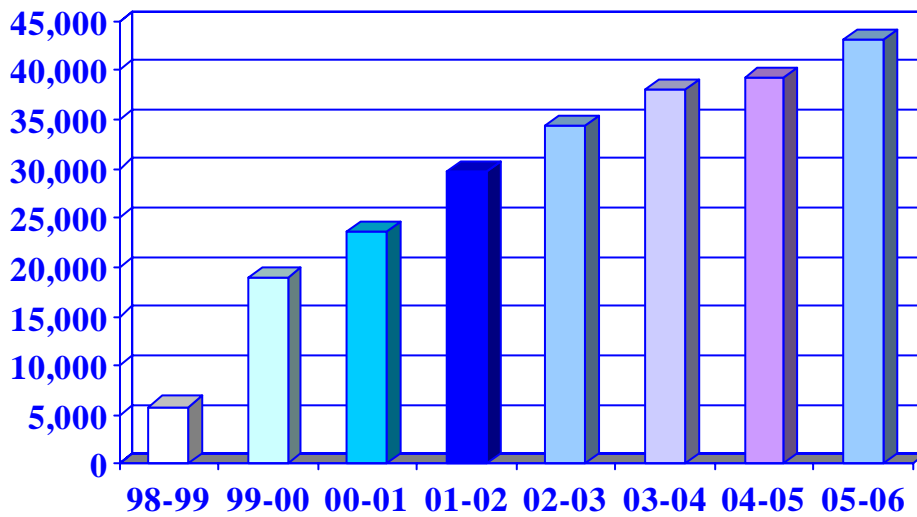
Capacity building:

Enrollment in the Abbott preschool program has increased dramatically since its inception in 1999. During the 2004–2005 school year, the sixth year of Abbott Preschool implementation, the 31 Abbott districts served over 39,000 three- and four-year-old children in preschool – 75% of the possible universe of 52,160 children.

- *37% of children served in district classrooms*
- *7% of children served in Head Start classrooms*
- *56% of children served in private provider classrooms via contracts with the districts*

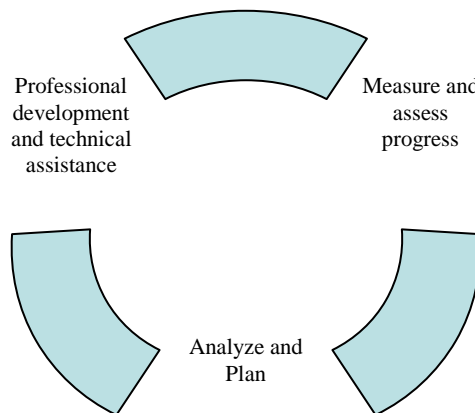
Although over 3,630 children are currently served meeting both federal Head Start and state Abbott standards and using a combination of state and federal funding. OECE estimates over 3,000 children are entitled to the Abbott program are served in Head Start programs that do not meet Abbott standards. To promote collaboration between Head Start grantees and school districts, the federal Administration for Children and Families and the State of New Jersey have established protocols for problem-solving and decision-making that facilitates local collaboration. In addition, a model for developing a Letter of Agreement between the district and Head Start agency has been developed through the State of New Jersey and the Administration for Children and Families. The DOE and the Department of Human Services have worked closely with the regional ACF to develop a draft Letter of Agreement among the state and federal partners. This document is currently under review. The full inclusion of all Abbott-eligible children served in Head Start programs continues to be a major objective of the DOE.

Working with their local Early Childhood Advisory Councils, districts found diverse and creative ways to reach out to families. The table below shows Abbott preschool enrollment growth from 1998 to present.



Program Quality - the Continuous Improvement Cycle:

High-quality education depends on a continuous improvement cycle. This cycle consists of gathering evidence about program progress, analyzing this evidence and making plans for improvement, and implementing those plans. The process then begins again with another assessment of progress. The OECE uses this continuous improvement cycle at the state level by measuring overall progress toward achieving full enrollment in high quality programs that will result in children in Abbott districts entering kindergarten with the skills to succeed in school and life. At the district level the OECE assists districts with self-assessment, measuring progress, analyzing and planning, professional development and technical assistance.



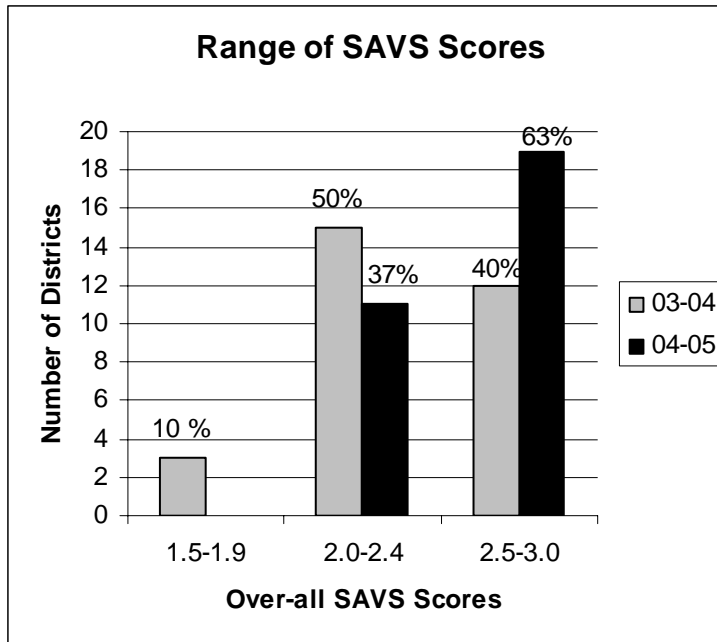
Measuring and Assessing Progress, Analyzing and Planning:

The Early Learning Improvement Consortium is a statewide initiative undertaken by the OECE to measure and assess progress. In 2002, the OECE brought together a group of the state's top early childhood education faculty to form The Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC). In this multi-year initiative, participating New Jersey institutions of higher education assist the OECE and the Abbott districts in identifying the particularized needs of preschool children and programs. The ELIC is responsible for collecting and reporting on data on children and classrooms. Each fall, assessments of kindergartners' skills have been

conducted to measure progress toward preparing children to succeed in school. In addition, members of the ELIC conduct classroom observations on 13 percent of the Abbott preschool classrooms to measure progress in program quality. Findings have been reported yearly and can be found at <http://www.nj.gov/njded/ece/reports.htm>. These reports show that over the six years of the Abbott Preschool program quality has increased dramatically and children's scores at kindergarten entry showing significant and meaningful gains.

Teacher qualifications are another area where the OECE collects information to inform program decisions. Research shows a clear link between preschool teacher qualifications and program quality which in turn impacts outcomes for children. In the 2004-2005 school year, more than 98% of teachers in Abbott preschool classrooms met certification requirements. To meet the needs of our state's burgeoning bilingual population, the Department of Education hosted bilingual preschool teacher recruitments in October, 2004. Another way that quality is supported in the Abbott classrooms is by ensuring that teacher salaries in provider settings are comparable to in-district preschool teacher salaries. In 04/05, the average salary for an Abbott preschool teacher was \$44,141.

The Self Assessment Validation System (SAVS), begun in the 2004-2005 school year is an annual process that assists districts in implementing a continuous improvement cycle. The SAVS is designed to guide the district through a systematic self-appraisal of its preschool program. The SAVS criteria are derived from the *NJ Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* and *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 through 8* (National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education). Findings of the SAVS inform revisions to the district operational plans. The graph below shows progress districts have made statewide from the 03-04 school year to the 04-05 school year. Each of the 17 items on the SAVS is rated on a three point scale where 1 = not met, 2 = in progress and 3 = fully met. Each district then receives an overall SAVS score derived by averaging the 17 component scores. As can be seen districts have made dramatic improvements toward implementing the standards required for high quality.



Classroom Quality:

As part of the Continuous Improvement Cycle, Abbott districts are required to conduct regular observations of all preschool classrooms. Structured observation instruments provide the depth of information needed to plan appropriately for professional development and technical assistance that will bring about program improvement.

Districts use the results of the SAVS, classroom observations and other data to develop detailed professional development plans which are submitted to the OECE.

Child Progress:

In addition to using child assessment on a random sample of children to evaluate progress in the Abbott program statewide, teachers use on-going child assessment as part of the Continuous Improvement Cycle in their classrooms. To capture information about children's language and literacy development and to assist teachers in using valid classroom assessment to improve teaching, the OECE, with the help of the ELIC, created a language arts literacy performance-based assessment. The Early Learning Assessment System is based on the Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations and assists preschool and kindergarten teachers to assess children's emerging literacy skills. Teachers then use this information to adapt and individualize interactions for specific children and to adjust activities on a classwide basis.

Some Examples of Professional Development and Other Technical Assistance:

The OECE uses results of all of the data collections efforts to design effective technical assistance for individual districts and to determine appropriate topics for professional development statewide. The following gives some examples of these activities:

- Monthly informational meetings for Abbott Early Childhood Supervisors that included workshop components on specific topics as well as general technical assistance on program administration
- Master teacher and supervisor training on topics such as supporting English language learners, positive behavior supports, and using structured observation tools for continuous improvement
- Curriculum-specific meetings that brought together districts that use the same curriculum to develop plans clarify professional development needs and share implementation strategies.
- A ten month, intensive seminar for 45 new master teachers that helped them understand research-based best practice in preschool as well as the role of a mentor or adult education
- Veteran master teacher training for 120 master teacher generalists and specialists
- A conference for preschool leaders offered in conjunction with New Jersey City University, with speakers on topics such as inclusion strategies, supporting English language learners, and math/science infusion.

Districts submitted detailed professional development plans with their budgets for 2004-2005. Total budgeted cost for Abbott preschool professional development was \$1,364,460. The emphasis was on curriculum implementation and the implementation of the Early Learning Assessment System (ELAS).

Early Childhood Program Aid

New Jersey is a leader in preschool education nationally, with most attention paid to the accomplishments of our Abbott program in the state's 31 neediest school districts. Still, there are pockets of disadvantaged children in many other districts that do not benefit from Abbott funding. By state statute districts with over 20% and under 40% of the population eligible for free or reduced lunch receive Early Childhood Program Aid to increase kindergarten to full day and to provide at least a half day of preschool for four year old children.. Currently, there are 101 non-Abbott districts that receive Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) funding because more than 20, but less than 40 percent of their students are low-income. This year, more than 8,500 children were served by ECPA.

The OECE staff assists county education specialists in review of ECPA operational plans, and responds to district requests for technical assistance on early childhood programs and policies. ECPA districts are expected to provide high-quality programs that are developmentally appropriate and consistent with the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*. They must use community resources and plan parent involvement and professional development activities.

During 2004-2005, the OECE increased professional development opportunities for ECPA districts. ECPAs that have selected one of the recommended curricula have been invited to curriculum-specific planning and training. In addition, ECPA administrators attended the

Leadership in Preschool Education conference hosted by the OECE in May. Even greater participation by ECPA districts in OECE professional development is planned for 2005-2006.

Early Launch to Learning Initiative

This has been an exciting year for the OECE as the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) got underway. ELLI provides funds to non-Abbott districts that successfully apply to implement or expand a high quality preschool program. ELLI classrooms are composed of children from low-income families funded with ELLI moneys, other children from the community and children with disabilities. Districts have opened and improved classrooms, added staff, provided professional development, and become part of a network of ELLI districts. OECE hosts bi-monthly informational meetings for administrators and supervisors and the Leadership in Preschool Education conferences. ELLI administrators also participated in the curriculum-specific professional development and planning meetings along with their counterparts from ECPA and Abbott districts as part of the OECE's effort to expand the network of support for quality preschool implementation across the state.

In its first year, ELLI made high quality preschool available to nearly 1,000 children in 27 districts. In all, 489 low-income children participated in these programs for a total cost of \$1,565,411.

Next Year ...

The Continuous Improvement Cycle guides all of the work of the Office of Early Childhood Education. Based on results of the SAVS, ELIC research, and in-house data analysis, the staff of the OECE is looking ahead to the following goals for 2005-2006:

- Improving curriculum implementation through curriculum-specific meetings
- Enhancing services for special populations
- Increasing focus on math and science learning
- Building early childhood expertise among site-level administrators so the leaders in school district and provider settings know what a high quality preschool class looks like
- Introducing the Center Level Assessment System for providers to use for self assessment
- Developing a self-assessment system for ECPA and ELLI districts to ensure that decision making in these districts is based on evidence and analysis of that evidence.
- Continuing to improve the budget planning and monitoring process to increase efficiency and fiscal responsibility